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Article Critique 3

30 June 2014

Tufekci, Zeynep. (2010). Who acquires friends through social media and why? “Rich get

richer” versus “seek and ye shall find”. In *Proceedings of the 4th international AAAI conference on weblogs and social media (ICWSM, 2010).*

**Theoretical Perspective**

This study aims to examine the differences between people who make friends online and those who do not. Further, the study attempts to explain why these differences exist, hypothesizing that it is either because people who have friends offline are successful at acquiring online friends or because people seek out online friendships. The literature review is thorough in explaining the studies which relate to the first part of the author’s research questions (the differences between making on and offline friends). There are fewer studies cited to support the hypotheses regarding why these relationships form. However, the theories which the author uses seem appropriate to the questions he is asking and provide an adequate conceptual framework for the study.

The author’s understanding of the need for this study is that it has questions which remain unresolved. In an increasingly online world, it does seem important for research to be conducted regarding the ability of people to make (and retain, an aspect not studied here) friends online. This study seeks to examine variables which correlate to having online friends, a question which has been posed in previous research with inconsistent results over time. Additionally, many of the studies cited are over a decade old; more recent research is needed in an environment which changes as rapidly as the internet. Thus, it seems that further research should be conducted to analyze the directions in which the making of online friendships is moving.

The author uses previous literature to support the need for this study. This research is strong in pointing to the need for further research in the making of online friendships. Some previous research is cited pertaining to the questions regarding why online friendships are made, but few studies are cited and those are comparatively old, especially considering the rapidly changing nature of the internet.

The author’s purpose is to identify characteristics which contribute to or detract from the making of online friendships and then to evaluate why people are able to make those friendships. He asks what variables contribute to the making of online friendships using social networking sites (SNS) and then hypothesizes that these friendships are made either because the people making them are socially savvy and have many friends offline as well or because people go online looking for friendships. The author’s questions regarding the variables which correlate to the making of online friendships are clear and appropriate to the conceptual framework of the study, but the hypotheses about why online friendships are made are not dichotomous and thus other explanations are possible.

**Research Design and Analysis**

The study is an observational study which used both quantitative and qualitative elements. Since the aim was to assess the current usage of social networking sites and whether the friendships made therein were equivalent to friendships made through other means, an observational study is appropriate. In other words, since the purpose was to find out what people were experiencing, rather than what might happen, an observational study was a valid approach.

This study was conducted at a large university using 617 students in several social science classes. The sample was a convenience sample. It proved to be diverse along racial lines and had approximately even numbers of male and female participants. The study was intended to examine the social networking of internet users; a desired age of this population was not specified. Thus, it is a limitation of the study that the author only surveyed and interviewed college students, as they represent only a portion of all internet users. The study is not generalizable to the entire population of internet users, a limitation that the author notes.

The procedures of this study allow the author access to the research questions, but it is difficult to imagine that this was the best way in which to access this information. An observational design is adequate to assess the habits of people using SNS sites and the number of friends that they have (on and offline), but this study seeks to see what predictors there are for having online friends. Simply analyzing the data to conclude some correlated possibilities for when participants are more likely to have online friends would be a sufficient use of this method. However, the author attempts to see under what conditions online friends become “real” friends. This is not best accomplished through an observational design. Further, the survey and the interview questions were all self-reported, which may have resulted in bias. More information regarding the items asked in the survey would have been useful.

This study examined participants’ use of social networking sites, their sociality both on and offline, and their understandings about the benefits and challenges of both on and offline friendships. To measure the first construct, time on SNS sites, the author asked participants to rate their amount of time spent on those sites. To control for other internet uses, the author also asked how long participants spent on the internet in general. To inquire about offline friends, participants were asked how many friends they keep in touch with on a regular weekly basis. Finally, participants were asked whether they thought it was possible to meet new friends in online environments. These are appropriate ways in which to ascertain the answers to the proposed research questions. However, given that the SNS use was self-reported, there may be inadvertent or intentional discrepancies between participants’ responses and actual SNS use and also about their being in touch with friends. Additionally, there were no reported measures of reliability: the qualitative data were not seen by a second coder (or even by a second author), and the author did not list the items asked in the surveys to see if there were questions which assessed the reliability of the questions about SNS use and contact with friends.

The author presents descriptive variables regarding whether participants believed in the possibility of online friendships. Other data included a regression model of variables predicting the meeting of new friends using social networking sites. The qualitative data were coded thematically based on participant responses. A second coder would have enhanced the reliability of this qualitative data. In spite of the limitations, the analyses performed help to answer the research questions posed: they contribute to answering the research questions. The data analyses are clearly presented, appropriate for the study design, and appropriate for the data collected.

**Interpretation of Results and Findings**

The author did not adequately address the limitations of this study, citing only the sample of college students as a limitation. While this certainly does limit the generalizability of the study, the observational (or non-experimental) design of the study limits its internal validity. The author is seeking to explain the relationship between SNS and friendships, but that is not possible to do with this type of study.

The results of the study show that meeting new friends using SNS is correlated to being African American, a person’s number of offline friends, time spent on the internet, using communicative technology such as instant messaging, and believing that it is possible to make new friends online. However, the author takes these findings and attempts to predict a casual relationship regarding why people believe or disbelieve in the possibility of online friendships. The author goes too far in his analysis in making this type of prediction.

The author does explicitly relate the findings back to the study’s theoretical base. While this could have been done more thoroughly, it is done adequately. He especially uses space to relate his findings to note where his findings differ from previous studies.

This significance of this study is that it adds to the conversation about social networking sites and their role in online and offline friendships. The study does not prove anything, but it does provide some information regarding the likelihood of people connecting with others through social networking. However, because of the study’s limitations, further research should be conducted on a broader sample of the population to see whether the results are consistent across age groups, as participants who are either older or younger than college students may have diverse experiences in making and keeping online and offline friends.